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FORTIFIED DWELLINGS OF A FORGOTTEN PAST: THE MYSTERY OF KOREAN MOUNDS

Abstract

The Korean Peninsula has been inhabited since at least 10,000 BCE, with evidence of settlements dating back to circa 6,000 BCE. The earliest dynastic kingdom, Gojoseon, is traditionally believed to have been founded roughly 4300 years ago, yet remnants of even older civilizations remain scattered across the country. Among these are megalithic structures, such as dolmens from the 2nd millennium BCE, with hundreds of thousands spread across the Korean landscape.

While Korean mounds are typically classified as tombs, their true purpose may be more complex. Much like the Egyptian pyramids and temples, which were initially assumed to be exclusively burial sites, and the mounds and pyramid-like structures of China, these mounds have been assigned a similar identity despite a lack of widespread human remains. The sealed wooden chambers, encased in layers of clay and earth, were designed to protect their contents not only from grave robbers but potentially from environmental elements as well. Ancient sites like the Gaya Tumuli or the Marsian Tumuli Mounds, traditionally considered burial sites, may instead represent fortified dwellings or repositories of cultural preservation, safeguarding knowledge and artifacts of a lost civilization. If any Korean mounds contain artifacts that don't align with typical burial practices, this could support this theory.

Introduction

The idea that these mounds were dwellings or storage rather than tombs is an exciting alternative view. If ancient survivors faced catastrophic floods or environmental collapse, they might have built these structures to preserve knowledge, artifacts, or remnants of their world, ensuring that future generations could rediscover them.

One aspect to consider is whether any mysterious or unexplained artifacts have been found in Korean burial mounds that don't fit traditional funerary purposes but might instead hint at an intentional effort to safeguard important cultural or technological relics. At Gaya Tumuli, burial mounds have yielded unexpected artifacts, including items that hint at trade networks due to the findings of interconnected chambers, advanced craftsmanship, and possibly even ritualistic preservation. If these objects were deliberately stored for future generations, it could support the idea of a dwelling rather than just a tomb.

If researchers ever apply ground-penetrating radar or more advanced techniques to study these mounds, they could potentially uncover additional chambers or elements that shift the historical narrative.

Egyptian Temples/Pyramids & Chinese Pyramid/Mounds

Many cultures and religions speak of a Great Flood catastrophe that appears to have spread globally. These mounds could have served as sealed shelters for survivors of an environmental catastrophe, adding a unique perspective to their purpose.

Many of the Korean mounds are located in mountain regions. Ancient burial sites can sometimes be misinterpreted, and there are cases around the world where structures originally thought to be tombs turned out to have other purposes.

The Gaya Confederacy had burial mounds that contained iron weapons, pottery, and trade goods. Some of these mounds even had multiple chambers, which could suggest a more complex function than simple burials. If any of these chambers were designed for long-term storage or preservation, items would and almost always are found.

One of the most famous discoveries of human remains in an ancient Korean burial mound is the Tomb of King Muryeong. This tomb, located in Gongju, South Korea, was accidentally discovered in 1971 and contained the intact remains of King Muryeong, who ruled the Baekje Kingdom from 501 to 523 CE, along with his queen. The tomb had remained untouched for over a millennium, making it a rare archaeological find.

However, many of the Silla burial mounds, which are among the most well-known ancient tombs in Korea, were constructed in a way that made excavation extremely difficult. The wooden tombs were sealed with layers of clay and earth, which, over time, compressed the structures, making it nearly impossible to retrieve human remains. Instead, archaeologists have uncovered treasures and artifacts that provide insight into the lives of the Silla elite.

While the Silla burial mounds are widely accepted as tombs, their impenetrable construction has made it difficult to confirm with absolute certainty that every single mound contains human remains. The wooden tombs sealed with clay and earth have compressed over time, making excavation nearly impossible.

Interestingly, Korea also has dolmens, which are megalithic structures believed to be burial sites, but some scholars have debated their exact purpose. These dolmens, found in high concentrations across Korea, are found in Europe and Asia, leading to theories that they may have had ritualistic or even astronomical significance, potentially connecting the ancient world.

So, while the prevailing view is that these mounds were built as tombs, the possibility of alternative interpretations, especially for certain structures, remains open to discussion.

Marsian Mounds

The clusters of mounds constructed on a hill called Mt. Marisan in Haman County, Gyeongsangnam-do Province are together known as the Marisan Tumuli. The political leaders of Aragaya were said to dwell here from the first through the mid-sixth century.

Field surveys and archaeological excavations were performed in the early 20th century at the Marisan Tumuli. Based on the findings, the cemetery was placed on the Japanese colonial list of Historic Places. The location was actually designated as two separate Historic Places—the Dohang-ri Tumuli and Malsan-ri Tumuli—based on the administrative boundaries of the era. The two colonial Historic Places were redesignated as Historic Sites in 1963 under the Cultural Heritage Protection Act.

Excavations at the Marisan Tumuli that have been carried out since the early 20th century have revealed large quantities of burial objects, including pottery, iron weapons, and trade goods. Along with the shared types of Gaya pottery appearing across the nominated cemeteries—the footed bowl, jar pedestal, and long-necked jar—the Marisan Tumuli have also yielded unique local pottery variations. One example is items perforated to create a flame motif. Figurative pottery in the form of a house, wheel, deer, and ship have also been found in this location.

Bone Deterioration

Bones can degrade over time, even in sealed environments, but the process depends on several factors. While the absence of air slows decomposition, bones can still break down due to moisture, soil acidity, and microbial activity.

In extremely dry or oxygen-deprived conditions, bones may preserve for thousands of years, as seen in mummies or well-sealed tombs. However, if the burial mound has high humidity or acidic soil, the collagen in bones can deteriorate, eventually leading to disintegration.

This could explain why some Korean burial mounds lack human remains—if the conditions were unfavorable for preservation, the bones may have completely broken down over centuries.

While bone deterioration doesn't outright disprove the theory that these mounds could have been used for storage or preservation, if they were intended as sealed repositories, their builders might have chosen materials that could withstand environmental changes—like metals, pottery, or written records on durable surfaces.

For example, ancient civilizations often stored ceramic vessels, metal tools, or stone tablets in sealed spaces, which are far more resistant to decay than organic materials.

Korean Flood Motifs: The Subtle Echoes

Although Korean mythology does not feature a singular, explicit flood story like Mesopotamia's Atrahasis or the Biblical Noah, water-related catastrophe motifs are interwoven in local traditions and shamanistic rites.

Namhae, the god of the southern sea, is said to flood coastal lands when angered. Ritual offerings (see Lee, Peter H. *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, 1993) were performed to appease Namhae, acknowledging the sea's dual role as giver and destroyer.

According to *Samguk Yusa* (Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms), King Suro was born from an egg floating on waves. Symbolically, the sea as cosmic waters becomes a medium of rebirth after catastrophe (see Ha, Tae-Hung and Mintz, Grafton K., trans. *Samguk Yusa: Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea*, 1972).

Mountain worship (san-shin) as discussed in Kim, Jung Young's *Mountain Worship in Korean Shamanism* (2003) emphasizes mountains as high-ground sanctuaries against disasters, encoding cultural instincts to flee upward in times of flood.

The river god Habaek appears in various texts including the *Samguk Sagi* and shamanic oral traditions (see Lee, Peter H., ed. *Myths of Korea*, 1989). Village rituals like Byeolsin-gut include prayers to avoid flooding and natural disasters.

Global Flood Motifs: The Universal Connection

- **Mesopotamia (Atrahasis, Gilgamesh)**: See Dalley, Stephanie, trans. Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh and Others (1989).
- **Hebrew (Noah)**: The Book of Genesis, chapters 6–9.
- Greek (Deucalion): Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book I.
- **Atlantis**: Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias* dialogues; Hancock, Graham. *Fingerprints of the Gods* (1995).

Korean flood motifs, though subtle, align symbolically with global flood myths. They reinforce the hypothesis that certain Korean mounds may represent not just tombs, but living archives of survival strategies and cultural memory encoded in earth and stone.

Ancient Korean Chariots

While Korean mythology does not describe mechanical or engineered aerial craft in explicit detail—such as India's vimanas or speculative Chinese flying chariots—it preserves a vivid symbolic memory of aerial vehicles through divine and draconic imagery.

In particular, the dragon chariot motif, most clearly seen in the story of Haemosu (as recorded in *Samguk Sagi* and *Samguk Yusa*), acts as a metaphorical sky vehicle:

- **Dragons are liminal beings**, bridging water, earth, and sky, embodying natural forces and cosmic authority (Lee, Peter H., ed. *Myths of Korea*, 1989).
- **Riding a dragon** implies temporary access to the divine realm or a sanctioned aerial crossing (Ha, Tae-Hung and Mintz, Grafton K., trans. *Samguk Yusa: Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea*, 1972).
- The **dragon-drawn chariot** symbolizes sovereignty over terrestrial and heavenly realms, echoing divine kingship and mythic ascension (Kim, Jung Young. *Mountain Worship in Korean Shamanism*, 2003).

This form of travel is not mechanical in a technological sense (there are no described engines or mechanisms), but it signals a deep archetypal human longing to ascend—to traverse the boundary between earth and heaven.

Regional Parallels

- **Chinese mythology**: The Jade Emperor and immortals travel in dragon-drawn chariots or cloud carriages (yunche) (Birrell, Anne. *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*, 1993).
- **Japanese mythology**: Heavenly maidens (Tennin) use feathered robes (hagoromo) to ascend and descend, representing divine flight (Ashkenazi, Michael. *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*, 2003).
- **Daoist lore**: Immortals often ride cranes or dragons as transcendence vehicles (Little, Stephen, and Eichman, Shawn. *Taoism and the Arts of China*, 2000).
- **Siberian and Central Asian shamanic traditions**: Spirit journeys involve riding spirit animals or aerial sleighs to cross worlds (Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, 1964).

Symbolic Function

This symbolic sky chariot motif performs multiple roles:

- It signifies **divine legitimacy** or chosen status.
- It embodies spiritual transformation and enlightenment.
- From an alternative perspective, it may encode cultural memories of advanced sky travel or lost technologies, woven into myth.

Korean dragon chariot imagery stands firmly within the East Asian aerial vehicle archetype. It reinforces the widespread mythic pattern of ascension, cosmic travel, and the human yearning to rejoin the heavens—a theme resonant across ancient high cultures and foundational to the symbolic flame of Korean mythic heritage.

Literature

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